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MY MEMOIRS

BY DOROTHEA WEISS SZCZESNIAK

I was born in Stuttgart, Germany, but lived in Berlin with my parents and younger sister. My Father and Mother were both sales people, but my Mother did not work anymore to take care of us. My Father was also a fine musician, playing piano, percussion and the Zither. But what I remember most was his beautiful singing voice. I loved to sing also, so we sang many times together. The only instrument my father still owned was the Zither and he used to play it often. We lived in a 2 room apartment in "Schonehauser" allee, a big housing complex, with a Court Yard where my sister and I used to play with other children. Since as Jews we were not allowed to go to a public school, we went to a Jewish School one hour away from home. I loved going to school and of course my favorite subject was music. Hitler is already in power and has started the persecution of the Jews. We could not sit on any park bench or go ice skating, it was not long before we had to wear the Yellow Star of David and Jews became easy targets of abuse. Coming home one day from school I was chased by two Hitler youths who threw stones at me, luckily they missed. Although we were poor and started to feel the restrictions and persecutions, my early childhood in Berlin was not all unhappy, because I was surrounded by a loving family, which included beside by parents and sister, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Many Jews managed to flee Germany and though we did not have the money to get the

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papers we needed, my parents decided there was no other alternative but try to flee illegally to Belgium . My parents made it clear to my sister and me not to tell anyone about our intent to flee the country. As little as we were we understood the gravity of the situation and did not talk about our plans to any one. It was a tearful good bye to my Father who was leaving first with a friend to prepare a place for us. My poor Grandmother (Oma) was crying because she knew in her heart she would never see her son again. It took two months before my Dad wrote to let us know it was our turn to go. My Mother sold as much as she could of our belongings, leaving much behind. We could not carry a lot and had to keep everything to a minimum. There was an urgency to leave as fast as we could. My dear Grandmother had to go thru the same heartbreaking goodbyes again, and though it was very hard for us too, we were looking forward seeing my Dad again. It was arranged for a Mrs. Grunbaum to go with us. She, like us, was fleeing Germany with her three children and she had contacts who would help us at different places. So here we were, my Mother with two children, age nine and seven, and Mrs. Grunbaum with three children, age seven, five and three, trying to enter Belgium illegally. It took us three months. Every time we made it across the border into Holland we were caught and returned to Germany. Thanks to Mrs. Grunbaum's contacts we were taken in by kind people who provided us with shelter and food for a few days, until we were off again trying to cross another unguarded border. Many nights we had to sleep in the woods and were hungry. One evening we had just crossed into Holland when we were apprehended by Dutch border guards. They felt sorry for us, and kept us overnight in a jail cell, so

we did not have to sleep in the woods. The next morning after giving us breakfast, the guards escorted us back into Germany. At this point we were all desperate and frightened. My Mother and Mrs. Grumbaum were utterly discouraged not knowing what to do anymore. We could not go back and every time we crossed the border we got caught. Finally a friend of my Father's came by car from Belgium over an unguarded border he knew in Holland, took us over the border and from there into Belgium. The reunion with my dad was a joyous one. We were together again, and free in a country that did not care if we were Jews or not. Of course we had to learn French and adopt ourselves to a different country, but the Belgian people were very kind and helpful. My sister and I enrolled in a public school, not far from where we lived, my Father found a job in a factory. Our lives seem to begin to be normal again. Alas this did not last more than a year. The Germans invaded Belgium in May 1939, and the persecution of Jews started soon after. I still remember the Principal of our school saying with tears in her eyes, that the Jewish students were not allowed in school anymore by German decree. We moved from place to place, always a step ahead of the Nazis and my parents had "Jew" stamped on their identification cards. Our final legal apartment was the nicest we had so far, but not for long. One day 2 Men in civilian clothes knocked on our door, when my Mother opened the door she was told they were the Gestapo and would come back and pick us up in the evening. My parents contacted a Belgian friend who lived in the Country to please take my sister and me and she came to pick us up, we stayed with her for 2 weeks. We heard that two uniformed Gestapo came for us to our

apartment that night, but thank God we were not there. My parents found 2 rooms in a house where a dear Belgian friend lived, and we found a hiding place. Our friend Madame Dujardin had an apartment on the second floor and my sister and I had a small room right next to her. My parents had a large room on the first floor where we lived. My Father stayed in hiding never going out because he looked very Jewish, my Mother who was a blonde with blue eyes and looked German dared to go out sometimes. Since my Father could not go out to work he managed to roll and pack cigarettes for a friend who provided him with the tobacco, and thus make very little money. My sister and I went twice a week to a Belgian family for dinner and with the help of other Belgian friends we survived. It was on March 15, 1943, that the Gestapo caught up with us. They went to my parents room first, told them to wait in the hall, and I heard them come upstairs to our room. They pushed our door open, and started speaking in German to us, and we made believe we did not understand them. At that moment Madame Dujardin came out of her apartment and told the Gestapo "they are my Grandchildren, I am taking care of them for my working daughter". With that she put school bags into our hands telling us to hurry or we'd be late for school. We started to go downstairs as the Gestapo believed her. I was trembling fearing my younger sister would cry out to my Mother and all would be lost. But as we approached our parents they looked at us without saying a word and we went by without a sound from my sister. Later when she was placed with a family she ran away but now amazingly she kept quiet. I was also amazed the Gestapo believed Madame Dujardin without question, when she told them we were her

Grandchildren. I looked so Jewish that the family who took me in would not let me out of the house even though I took the identity of their deceased daughter. When we left for School that morning in March, we actually got into a trolley car and went to another friend who kept us for a couple of days until we were placed with two different families. I went to live with Mr and Mrs. Michael Schugalte who were both well known performers. He was a violinist and orchestra conductor, and she was a singer and dancer. They would not work for the Germans and they lived on jewelry they sold. With the help of Madame Dujardin and the landlord where we were in hiding. I got all the pictures and documents belonging to my parents, and thus still have that to remember them by. I also received 2 cards from them when they were held in Malines before being transported to Auschwitz. In 1998 I went to Belgium to visit my sister who still lives there and together we visited the Musee Juif De La Deportation IN Malines, where our parents and other Jews were kept before being transported to Auschwitz. It used to be Army barracks but they made a small Museum out of it. It was a very moving and tearful moment for my sister and me. After the loss of our parents in 1943, it was a very hard time for both of us. I remember crying for days. But I realized I could not do anything about the situation and had to be prudent. But even now I wasn't safe. The Grandson of the landlady of the house I was living in was also in hiding though he wasn't Jewish because the Nazis picked up all the young people to be sent to work in Germany, so he had devised an alarm and Grandma was the lookout. One day the alarm sounded and I had to swing myself with a rope from our roof to another. I was scared of heights and never thought I would be able to

do it, but somehow I did, but I still can't remember how I got back to our apartment. After that for safety reasons I was hidden for nine months with another family. During that time I developed rheumatic fever and returned to the Schugalte's. Thank God I recovered from it and had no ill effect from it. The war ended when I was sixteen but I stayed with Mr. And Mrs. Schugalte until I was 21, the age of majority in Belgium. My sister was married, so I rented a room from her, found a job in an office and studied voice at night at a school connected with the Conservatory of Brussels. I met my husband a few years later and we immigrated to America. It was my Father's dream to come to America. Little did I know I would be the one to fulfill his dream. America will always have a special place in my heart for the freedom and the new life I have found here. I will always be grateful and remember all those people who have helped us, Mrs. Dujardin, Mr. And Mrs. Schugalte, Mr. And Mrs. Wellens, and so many others.

I thank God for preserving my life, and giving me a new family, husband, son, daughter and 4 wonderful grandchildren.

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